Handel's Organ Concertos were written primarily as interludes in his Oratorios, the first two, according to Dr. Charles Burney, appearing with *Deborah* on March 17th and *Esther* on April 14th, 1733, both at the King's Theatre, Haymarket. Two new Organ Concertos were advertised for the Covent Garden performance of *Esther* on March 5th, 1735, of which a Mrs. Pendarves wrote to her mother ten days later, describing them as 'the finest things I ever heard in my life'. Thereafter it became commonplace to include Organ Concertos and, indeed, Concertos for other instruments too. Madame Fiquet du Bocage relates in a letter dated April 15th, 1750, that the Organ Concertos were played "either alone or accompanied by the Orchestra".

Sir John Hawkins ('A General History of the Science and Practice of Music' 1776) wrote of Handel: "When he gave a concerto, his method in general was to introduce it with a voluntary movement on the diapasons, which stole on the ear in a slow and solemn progression; the harmony close wrought, and as full as could possibly be expressed; the passages concatenated with stupendous art, the whole at the same time being perfectly intelligible, and carrying the appearance of great simplicity. This kind of prelude was succeeded by the concerto itself which he executed with a degree of spirit and firmness that no one has ever pretended to equal."

Almost without exception every one of Handel's Sacred and Secular Oratorios included at least one Organ Concerto – *Messiah* had them for performances in Dublin and London. It is probable that the Concerto Op. 4 No. 4 recorded here received its first public performance as an interlude to *Deborah on March 26th*, 1735 at Covent Garden, and 'No. 13' with *Israel in Egypt* on April 4th, 1739, at the Haymarket Theatre.

In his 'Remarks on Mr. Avison's Essay on Musical Expression' (1753) William Hayes wrote that Handel 'at the Age of Seventy to the Astonishment of all Mankind performed Wonders on the Organ, both set Pieces and extempore'. William Mason ('Essays on English Church Music' 1795) regretted that nothing could 'compensate for the want of that Solo, now alas! to be heard no more'.

Two sets of Organ Concertos were printed during Handel's lifetime; two others posthumously. The first, entitled 'Six Concertos For the Harpsichord or Organ' was announced in the London Daily Post dated 4 October 1738. The title page included the statement: "These Six Concertos were Published by Mr.Walsh from my own Copy Corrected by my Self, and to Him only I have given my Right therein. George Frederick Handel." From this, the Opus 4 set, are included on this disc numbers 1, 4, 5 and 6.

The second collection entitled 'A Second Set' was announced in the London Daily Post for November 8th, 1740. This set is without opus number and contains only two Concertos, of which one, known as number 13, is recorded here. The third collection imaginatively entitled 'A Third Set' was announced in the Public Advertiser for February 23rd, 1761, (Opus 7), and in 1797 Arnold published a fourth group of Concertos.

1: Organ Concerto Op. 4 No. 1 in g minor

Larghetto e staccato – Allegro – Adagio – Andante.

Only the first movement exists in Handel's handwriting. A version of the *finale* appears in the Trio Sonata Op.5 No.6. With Op.4 No.6 this Concerto was played at performances of 'Alexander's Feast' in 1737 and 1739.

2: Organ Concerto Op. 4, No. 2 in B-flat Major

A tempo ordinario, e staccato – Allegro – Adagio, e staccato – Allegro, ma non presto

Although most of the Organ Concertos are written in the Italian style, which demands free Italianate ornamentatio by the soloist and what Heinrich Schütz described as "steady Italian bowing" by the strings, we find here, as in all Handel's works, movements in the French manner, and in particular the opening Overture of this Concerto.

3: Organ Concerto Op. 4 No. 4 in F Major

Allegro – Andante – Adagio – Allegro.

The finale originally led straight into a choral Alleluia. The date March 25, 1735 appears after the last bar. For the published version Handel omitted the Alleluia and revised the closing bars of the final allegro itself. The Concerto was probably first performed with 'Deborah' (March 26th, 1735) or 'Athalia' (April 1st, 1735) - advertisements for both works announced 'with a new Concerto on the Organ'. The Concerto itself, with its choral addition, was certainly given at a performance of 'Il Trionfo' in 1737 - the manuscript has the words 'Segue il Concerto per l'organo e poi l'Alleluja. Fine dell'Oratorio G. F. Handel London March 14, 1737'. The theme of the first movement appeared also in the presto version of the Chorus 'Questo e il cielo di contenti' in Act I of 'Alcina' (16th April 1735).

4: Organ Concerto Op. 4 No. 5 in F Major

Larghetto – Allegro – Alla Siciliana – Presto.

There is no known complete Autograph. The Concerto is based on the Flute Sonata Op. 1 No. 2.

5: Organ Concerto Op.4 No. 6 in B flat Major

Andante allegro – Larghetto – Allegro moderato.

This is the only Organ Concerto with recorders instead of oboes, and one of the very few orchestral works with muted violins and *pizzicato* bass. The work exists in several versions. The first was for 'Alexander's Feast' in March 1737 – the manuscript is marked 'Concerto per il Liuto e la Harpa'. For this, only the organ accompaniment now exists. The second (represented by the autograph score) was for Harp and Orchestra. It was published in 1738 for Harp or Organ.

A third version rewrites the organ part so as to avoid a high "D" note but there is no proof that these alterations (which often seriously damage the shape of the phrases) had Handel's authorization. A fourth version, in autograph, transposed the first movement to A major as an alternative finale to Concerto 'Second Set' No. 2; a fifth version, for 'Alexander's Feast' in 1739, was for 'Harp, Lute, Lyricord and other Instruments'. Regrettably no music for this rare combination of instruments exists.

6: Organ Concerto No. 13 in F Major

Larghetto – Allegro – Larghetto – Allegro.

No. 1 of a 'Second Set' of Two Concertos published by Walsh in 1740. Though commonly called "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale", this title was only acquired at the beginning of the 19th century. The Organ Concerto is dated April 2nd, 1739. The first and last movements are from the Trio Sonata Op. 5 No. 6, published February 1739. The remaining two movements appear in the String Concerto Op. 6 No. 9, part of which exists in G Major, dated by Handel September 9th, 1738, in his "Imeneo" Overture.

Our front cover shows a performance of a Handel Oratorio at Covent Garden in 1808 with Handel's Organ (as used for his Organ Concertos during the Interludes in his Oratorios) at the back of the stage in a scene similar to his time. The Organ no longer exists and its specification is unknown.